

# "Partners in Stewardship": Considerations for natural resource stewardship and science in the national parks

By Nina S. Roberts, Ph.D.

CREATING PARTNERSHIPS can be both arduous and enjoyable. Although the concept of partnerships has been around for many decades, the need for them among land stewards has never been greater. Yet new strategies are often required to make the most of what they have to offer. Accordingly, the National Park Service, in collaboration with the USDA Forest Service and other federal land management agencies, hosted the national conference "Joint Ventures: Partners in Stewardship" in November 2003. Held in Los Angeles, this gathering explored ways to create effective partnerships that strengthen ties among communities, nonprofits, educational institutions, and government agencies as the nation strives to develop a more accessible and meaningful network of public parks and open spaces. Many of the ideas are applicable to nurturing partnerships for the scientific management and preservation of park natural resources.



## Partners in Stewardship

With more than 270 conference sessions, several major themes were ubiquitous throughout the week. Foremost was that of changing demographics, an indication that institutional change is needed in order for the National Park Service to move in new directions. It was clear to all that the National Park Service cannot continue to operate in the same traditional way. As conference participants affirmed, old thinking, rather than new problems, obstructs change. Additionally, the theme of diversity emerged in many sessions as a critical component of successful contemporary partnerships.

Several prominent figures in government, nonprofits, and the media gave insightful keynote addresses, stimulating new ways of thinking, ideas for the future, and impetus to move ahead. The speakers included Gale Norton, Secretary of the Interior; Fran Mainella, Director of the National Park Service; Lynn Scarlet, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Management and Budget; and David Rockefeller, Jr., Chairman of the Board of the National Park Foundation. "Keeping it real" was the attitude communicated by Ray Suarez, host of National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation*. Suarez shared an international perspective of public land use in the United States. Although "we have some of the most spectacular wonders of the world," he said, "we have ... a great challenge to create intergenerational solidarity." The nation is polarized between the haves and the have-nots, and public land management agencies, including the National Park Service, must strive toward greater equity in park access and opportunities for all Americans.

Another prevailing theme was the "power" of partnerships. Fundamental to strong unions are shared interests and concerns of all partners and the opportunity for spontaneity in sharing all viewpoints.

For example, giving skeptics a chance to voice their concerns and interests is powerful and allows a diversity of perspectives to surface and become part of the decision-making process. The key is to preserve relationships and permit partnerships to move in their own direction, at their own pace. Relationships that are forced or strewn with conflicts and dissatisfaction are not conducive to problem solving, whereas shared action can serve all stakeholders.

Partnerships related to marketing and to serving visitor education and park preservation purposes are a growing trend. "People who enjoy special places have a stake in these special places," noted Director Mainella. A current trend is marketing the park experience to diverse ethnic and cultural groups through the tourism industry. Tourism can help establish a meaningful relationship between diverse groups and the parks, a relationship that is underdeveloped and critical to park preservation. Suarez noted that 40 million foreign-born Americans today and millions more in the years to come "don't know your parks yet, don't love them yet, but will if you let them." Analyses of tourism can help organizations like the National Park Service meet the needs of these visitors and engage the interests of nonvisitors alike.

Partnerships in natural resource management and science were highlighted in conference sessions about the cooperative management of federal and private lands, addressing water resource issues at the watershed level, transportation issues, connecting urban populations with forest landscapes, development of the natural resource stewardship curriculum, training wildlife stewards, and others. Several sessions stressed that partnerships must be coordinated to combine scientific knowledge and experiential learning. Some of the innovative education and outreach programs (including coastal ecosystem education) and distance-learning partnerships that were profiled are achieving success. Another important theme was the need to involve academics and researchers in maintaining good scholarship and continuing to incorporate the human dimension of managing public lands. Case studies were presented, small groups interacted, panel presentations engaged audiences, and a full day focused on developing the skills needed for successful collaboration.

In the end, partnerships require compromise and the realization that what may work for one may not for another. Yet partnerships are limited in what they can accomplish only by our imagination.

Further information on the conference and session reports are available on the Web at [www.partnerships2003.org](http://www.partnerships2003.org). ■

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nina\_roberts@nps.gov

Education and Outreach Specialist, Natural Resource Information Division; Fort Collins, Colorado